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ABSTRACT

Higher turnover rates, decreased tenure, diminished job appeal, a shrinking pool of candidates, longer superintendent searches, and school districts' economic stresses and political and social cultures contribute to increases in the incidence of interim superintendent appointments and tenures. Because of these dynamics, more interim superintendents are serving longer terms and are faced with leading school districts through flux and change. This paper presents findings of a study that examined the nature and types of decisions made by the interim superintendent and how the decisions were shaped and/or determined by the district's environmental context. The research design utilized two methods. A first-ever survey of the nation's 50 State Departments of Education produced a 65 percent response rate. A case study of a midwestern district gathered data through observation, interviews, and document review. The survey data show a rise in both appointments and tenures for interim superintendents over the 10-year span from 1981/82 to 1991/92. Case-study findings show that the interim superintendent ranked high in the administrative change function and low in the administrative maintenance function. The superintendent had moved from a placeholder to a decision-maker role. A conclusion is that in districts experiencing crisis, an interim superintendent will likely act with all the requisite powers of a permanent superintendent. (LMI)

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The Interim Superintendency: A Case Study of Decisions and Decision Making Activities

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Introduction

> America has been busily reforming its public schools - toward teacher professionalism, school site management, parental involvement, and effective principaling. Mysteriously lost in much of the improve-the-schools discussion has been a consideration of the impact on local education's chief executive office: the school district superintendent.
>
> *Robert Crowson, 1990*

Numerous national reports attest to the state of crisis in America's public education system. Most of these reports have focused on the crisis in the classroom - student violence, teacher burnout, parent apathy, illegal weapons and drugs in the schools, students' weak academic achievement and poor performance on standardized tests. Other reports focus on the causes of the decline of the nation's K-12 public education system. These reports charge that unchallenging teacher education and preparation programs, antiquated K-12 curricula, nonresponsive school bureaucracies, inadequate funding for districts, and complicated social and economic problems plague the schools and have caused a failure in the effectiveness of the system, as well as a decline in the American public's confidence in its schools. Additionally, educational consumers and leaders alike have recently called from the abandonment of the public education system altogether. Acknowledging that "America's schools need fundamental structural changes, not just tinkering around the edge," Benno Schmidt, former dean of Columbia Law School and president of Yale University since 1986 announced resignation from his post in order to pursue the establishment of a national for-profit school system. In a somewhat similar vain, across the nation in cities such as Baltimore, Detroit, Milwaukee and Washington, D.C. scholars and community activists have pressed for the establishment of Black Male Academies. This, is in response to statistics that indicate a disproportionate number of black males in the lowest academic track and in special education classes, and the "generally poor record of integrated schools equipping black males with the knowledge and skills needed to succeed as citizens and in the workplace (Kunjufu, 1989). Adding to the discussion about crisis are those voices which

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speak of massive educational reform. School reform has once again surfaced as a national agenda item in the politician's world as well as an economic issue in the business world.

Despite each of these calls-to-arms, few studies have addressed the equally striking and growing crisis in educational leadership. One significant fallout of the educational crisis is that district leadership has undergone substantial changes. Specifically affected has been the district superintendency.

Background of the Problem

> People have gotten to the point where they just don't want these jobs!
>
> *Floretta McKenzie, former superintendent for Washington, D.C. , 1991*

Administrator turnover is a phenomenon that occurs in all organizations. Historically, the causes have been retirements, promotions, transfers, resignations, and death - to name a few. Beginning in the 1960's, when activists desiring change began exerting pressure on all social institutions, administrator turnover increased substantially. The greatest and most sustained pressure was exerted on educational institutions, generally, and on the administrators, especially. Consequently, public school administration has been more challenging during the last two decades, and as a result, administrator turnover has increased (Lyons, 1988; Norris, 1991). Accordingly, the problem of superintendent turnover is serious enough to warrant "in-depth studies of turnover at the state and local levels"(p.24).

It is indeed tough at the top in the nation's public school systems. Big cities, and increasingly suburban areas, are finding it harder and harder to fill the jobs of school superintendent. Despite the lure of six-figure salaries. present incumbents are quitting in droves, frustrated by disenchanted teachers, crumbling school buildings, squabbling politicians, and the problems of urban poverty (Norris, 1991). In 1991, more than 15 major cities in the nation were scrambling to find superintendents to run their school districts. The cities included Boston, Washington, D.C., San Francisco, Houston, Austin, El Paso, Indianapolis and Milwaukee.

Compounding high turnover rates among superintendents is the decreasing tenure of those superintendents who do serve. In the early 1980's, most school chiefs could be expected to stay on the job for at least five years. In 1982 Cunningham and Hentges reported an average tenure of 7.6 years. In 1992, the average dropped to two years and six months and is still falling. Today, on the eve of 1997, the tenure for urban superintendents is a mere 18 months. Several reasons are cited as contributing to higher turnover rates.

First, is ***mobility***. It is often necessary for school administrators to be mobile if they desire to move to progressively higher positions. Many superintendents have held several different positions in different school districts in their careers. Less than 10% of superintendents have spent their entire career in one school district. In school districts enrolling more than 10,000 students, 24% have held three or more superintendencies (Lyons, 1988). Second, is ***job appeal***. The attractiveness of the superintendency seems to have slipped substantially in the minds of the nation's superintendents. Seventeen percent fewer would choose the superintendency again and double the percentage of a decade ago would leave the field of education all together (Cunningham and Hentges, 1982). Despite the terms of employment being generous, with most superintendent salaries topping $100,000 a year, the demands of the job are perceived as being too great.

Though two indicators of change in the superintendency are a higher turnover rate and reduced total length of service in the position, several other factors contributing to change in the profession deserve discussion. These factors include: the pool of candidates for the superintendency/administrative supply and demand, length of the superintendent search, and school districts dynamics.

Pool of candidates. Though the terms of employment are generous, with many superintendent salaries topping $100,000 a year (the national average is $94,000), the pool of candidates for the superintendency is quite shallow. Those who once aspired to the superintendency, according to Giles (1990), are saying things like:

> No, thanks! The compensation and other rewards are not good enough. The hours are too long and frustrating. The perils are too great. I prefer the security of teaching or a mid-level administrative position(p.3).

A 1988 New England School Development Council study of administrative shortage in New England found that administrator retirement coupled with a lower number of new teachers entering administration has produced a shortage of potential superintendents. A 1988 report of school administrator supply and demand for the state of Maine concluded that there is a "genuine cause for concern":

> ... a high percentage of superintendents expect to retire (40.4%) or leave the superintendency for other employment (4.4%) within the next five years; and a replacement supply that may be illusory ...(p.7)

In 1982, more superintendents planned to continue in the superintendency until normal retirement age compared to 1972 study findings. In the 1990's superintendents are part of the nationwide trend to retire at earlier ages. With the advent of early retirement incentive plans being adopted by some boards in a number of states, superintendents are qualifying for retirement in their early fifties (Konnert and Augenstein, 1990). Although being eligible for retirement does not mean one has to retire, more and more superintendents are selecting the retirement option. According to the American Association of School Administrators, as many as three-quarters of all U.S. superintendents were eligible to retire in 1994.

Length of superintendent searches. Superintendent searches are becoming longer and longer. In the press to acquire "proven leadership" boards are extending their search timelines. Indeed, it is common for the same short list of names to circulate from search to search. Finding a fit between district demands and the candidate's profile is a time consuming and arduous task that is often expensive as well.

School district dynamics. The social and educational changes of the last few decades as well as the political, social, demographic and economic forecasts of the future are impacting districts. In more and more districts there is greater diversity among people with respect to occupation, income, origin, ethnicity/race, and religion. Further, districts in flux - those with operating levies to pass, with major personnel and contractual issues to resolve, and with school openings and closings to settle - are more the norm than the exception. Moreover, resolutions to these problems increasingly occur in contexts where the superintendent must not only bargain,

manipulate or fight opposing interest groups, but must also marshal support from these divergent groups. In short, the issue are demanding and the constituencies are diverse; resolution and closure take longer.

The Interim Superintendency. Higher turnover rates, decreased tenure, lessening job appeal, a shrinking pool of candidates, longer superintendent searches, and school districts' economic stresses and political and social cultures are each contributing to increases in the incidence of interim superintendent appointments and tenures. Because of these dynamics, an interim superintendent's tenure often is ***not*** an extended lame-duck administration. Rather, more interim superintendents are serving longer and are faced with leading school districts through flux and change. Thus, interim superintendents are making decisions that often, by necessity, have long-term impact on the course and direction of the nation's school districts. Where he or she was once a ***placeholder***, the interim superintendent is compelled by changes in the educational scene, the superintendent profession, and particularly demanding district circumstances to assume the role of ***decision maker***.

Interim superintendent's tenure and goals have caused several controversial issues to arise regarding administration, and education and instructional policy. On August 22, 1991, among mixed reactions from the district's leaders and constituencies, (now former) Detroit School Superintendent Deborah McGriff announced that she was sharply lowering district achievement goals, claiming that her goals were more realistic than those set by her predecessor, an interim - Dr. John W. Porter:

> In revising Porter's reform plan McGriff lowered district goals he [Porter] established for this year on the annual state science test, national reading tests and a community rating of district performance (*The Detroit News*, August 22, 1991, p. 1B).

Such a scenario may be indicative of future trends in the superintendency and in district leadership and management. Finally, though urban districts might be particularly affected, suburban districts may also experience such changes as they undergo a transition from one superintendent to another superintendent.

Superintendents provide leadership for the nation's most "essential industry" - education (Cunningham and Hentges, 1982, p.7). For over sixty

years, the American school superintendency has been subjected to the close scrutiny of the public and researchers. This study, much in the vain of previous research, is an examination of changes in the school superintendency. Educational governance, "the once barren wasteland of research" (Hentges, 1984 has profited from numerous and varied empirical studies since the late 1950's. Still, to-date there are no in-depth studies about the interim superintendency. The interim superintendency is viewed in this study as a significant event indicative of notable change in the superintendency profession, specifically, and educational governance, especially.

This study is the first to examine the interim superintendency. No studies have focused on the unique nature of this role. Though much can be extrapolated from the literature on the superintendency and accurately applied to the interim superintendency, much cannot. Moreover, much of the data reported in the literature on the superintendency was collected more than a decade ago and does not reflect the contemporary issue of the interim superintendency. Largely, because this study is the first of its kind, it serves as baseline data on the phenomenon. In sum, the suggestion to study school district administration is illuminated by Anderson (1990):

> Accounts are urgently needed that describe how administrators attempt to manage their realities (p.51).

In keeping with this call, this exploratory study was the first to investigate the unique nature of the interim superintendency by examining the nature and types of decisions made by the interim and how these decisions were shaped and/or determined by the environmental context of the district.

Research Purpose, Design and Analysis

The focus of this field study was to investigate the unique nature of an interim superintendency in a midwest suburban school district. Consistent with the stated purpose, the threefold objective of this study was to: (1) examine the nature and types of decisions made by an interim superintendent; (2) explore the role of the interim superintendent as a ***decision maker*** and as a ***placeholder***; and (3) describe a suburban school

district in terms of complexity during a period of administrative transition. Four basic research questions were posed:

1. What is the national incidence of interim superintendent appointment and tenures?

2. How do environmental forces (economic, social, and political) in the school district shape or determine the decisions made by the interim superintendent?

3. How do decisions made by the interim superintendent impact the operations of the school district?
   a. Why does the school district have an interim superintendent?
   b. What is the nature of the decisions made by the interim superintendent?
   c. What types of decisions does the interim superintendent make?

4. Is the interim superintendent a ***placeholder*** or a ***decision maker***?

A single case methodology was utilized in which three techniques - observation (over a 10 week period of 350 hours), interviews (structured and open-ended), and document review - generated data about the decisions and decision making activities of the interim superintendent. For the purposes of this study a descriptive survey was used to answer the first research question on the incidence of interim superintendent appointments and tenures. A brief, six-item questionnaire was mailed to the nation's fifty State Department of Education superintendents and the superintendent of public schools for the District of Columbia on August 3, 1992. A follow-up mailing on September 1, 1992 yielded a 65% response rate. State superintendents were requested to provide the number of interim superintendent appointments and tenure lengths for the academic years 1981-1982 and 1991-1992. Data for these years were requested in an attempt to ascertain whether a national trend occurred over the past decade. State superintendents rather than local district superintendents were chosen as recipients of the survey for two reasons. First, state department superintendents have access to data about the entire state, rather than just one district. Therefore, they could provide statewide data, which is more extensive. Second, were there indeed a national trend in interim superintendent appointments and tenures, attention to this concern may have reached the state department level and would likely be reflected in

their statewide research data. Of the respondents, 36% indicated that their State Department of Education does keep records on interim superintendent appointments and tenures. Sixty four percent of the respondents indicated that no such records were kept by their State Department of Education.

Increasingly, there has been greater use of the field study method in educational administration. Field study is particularly useful when analyzing administrative decision making and organizational environment issues. Administrators spend the major proportion of their time either making decisions or facilitating the making of them. Cunningham made the case for continued examination, through field study, of administrative decision making and organizational environment dynamics:

> Only through intensive field work involving extensive interviewing can the fabric of decisions really be discerned" (p.50).

Additionally, this method has been advocated for its use as a heuristic tool in the training programs for school administrators. Organizations are complex. Field study provides the opportunity

> ...to get away from looking at tiny fragments of structure with a microscope, and to stand back and try to understand some of the fundamental response patterns of organizations, in all their complexity (Miller and Friegen, 1980).

In naturalistic inquiry the inquirer is the "instrument; there are no magic formulas, no standardized observation schedules or statistical tables to apply. Further, the steps in data analysis are not discrete. Neither is movement from data collection to data analysis discrete. Rather, each step turns on the other synergistically. Essentially, four phases comprised data analysis for this study. *Initial analysis* extended through week one of the study. *Intermediate analysis* extended through weeks two and three. *Closing analysis* extended from the fourth week to the last day at the site. Each of these phases included the collection, transcription and coding of extensive observation data, interview data, and data from document review. *Integrative analysis* occurred after leaving the site. Here, efforts were made to further integrate the data and interpretations.

Findings, Conclusions and Discussion

Data obtained from the first-ever national survey of State Department of Education superintendents on interim superintendent appointments and tenures found that there was an increase in both phenomena over the decade including academic years 1981/1982-1991/1992. In those states where respondents indicated that such data were kept, interim superintendent appointments increased more than threefold from 10 in academic year 1981-1982 to 36 in academic year 1991-1992. Tenures increased by slightly more than one month from 4.3 months in academic year 1981-1982 to 5.8 months in academic year 1991-1992.

The original intent of this case study was to look at the decisions and decision making activities of an interim superintendent. In this case study, three environmental forces - declining district wealth, increasing heterogeneity of the community and increasingly dissenting interest groups - were responsible for organizational flux in the school district and affected the interim superintendent's decision making environment. These forces along with the resignation of the school district's superintendent created a decision making environment that was turbulent and uncertain. The interim superintendent ranked high in the *administrative change function* and low in the *administrative maintenance function*. He was involved in significant activity in goal setting and implementation; long term decision making and activity in levy passing, school openings, resolution of personnel issues, contractual negotiations and instructional policy change for the school district.

Though this conclusion may not hold for other interim superintendents, it can be asserted that in districts experiencing crisis, an interim superintendent will likely act with all the requisite powers and authorities as a "permanent" superintendent. This is so because crisis and the occurrence of opportunity for nonroutine decisions seem to co-exist. As a result, the interim superintendent can be responsible for determining educational policy for the district - particularly curricular policy, fiscal policy and capital improvements. Thus, the decisions and decision making activities of an interim superintendent quite closely correspond to those of a superintendent who has a "permanent" appointment. This interim

superintendent will not idly "hold the reins" until his or her predecessor arrives. The organizational environment and the board of education will issue a charge and call to action. Indeed, the bias for action will be overwhelmingly apparent. In order to move the organization through crisis, the interim superintendent will affect change and put the organization on a path for continued change. The essential finding of this case study was that an interim superintendent's tenure cannot axiomatically be characterized as a lame-duck administration. It is quite likely that a school district will need to resolve significant crises and undergo change during an interim superintendent's tenure.

The literature on organizational decision making is silent on the issue of interim administrators making policy decisions and affecting long term organizational change. The public education enterprise ought to be particularly sensitive to this research gap, especially in light of this study's findings and the researcher's prediction that more and more school districts will be led through crisis by interim superintendents whose appointments and tenures are increasing. This trend in educational governance demands more scrutiny. The world of the school superintendent has changed considerably in recent years and will continue to change.

In the press to reform and revitalize the nation's public K-12 educational system, the superintendency and the changes this profession is experiencing must not be overlooked. Crisis in our nation's educational leadership certainly portends crisis in our schools. Attention to significant trends in the superintendency can stimulate action, averting future crises which threaten the control and leadership of America's public schools, as well as the nation's commitment to the ideal of public education.

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